DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 345 CS 211 352

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TITLE The Literate Speaker: Relations between Oral and Written Rhetorical Acts in the Academic Discourse of Adolescents.
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 5-9, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Communication; Discourse Analysis; Educational Research; Grade 11; High Schools; High School Students; *Language Usage; Literary Criticism; *Oral Language; Rhetoric; Speech Acts; Student Writing Models; *Written Language
IDENTIFIERS *Academic Discourse; Conversation; Heart of Darkness; Rhetorical Competence; Rhetorical Strategies; *Speaking Writing Relationship

ABSTRACT

To investigate the rhetorical relations between oral and written texts in adolescents' academic discourse, a study examined oral and written language samples of three high school juniors in a San Francisco area middle class suburban community (two males and one female) participating in an English literature class. Discourse analytic techniques were used to analyze the students' natural language use during oral presentations critiquing Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." Written language samples were taken from the three students' responses to an assignment on the same topics that were orally presented. Analysis revealed that assertives (when the speaker commits to the truth of the expressed proposition) formed a high proportion of speech acts used by both female and male students. Overall, males tended to use more declaratives (when the speaker brings about a correspondence between propositional content and reality) and more directives (attempts by the speaker to have the hearer do something) than females. Analysis of speech acts in conjunction with the rhetorical strategies used showed that both males and females employed assertives with rhetorical acts that contained a literal/logical analysis. Also, students most often orally communicated knowledge of author's intent, text structure, and language patterns through assertives and declaratives, while knowledge of author's intent figured prominently in both oral and written texts. Results showed that the students' classroom language contained elements of advanced academic discourse. (Three tables of students' written and oral language texts are included.) (MM)

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The Literate Speaker:
Relations Between Oral and Written Rhetorical Acts in the Academic Discourse of Adolescents

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Paper presented at the 1988 Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association
New Orleans, Louisiana
April 5-9, 1988

CS 211352

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Abstract

This study was conducted to identify and examine the rhetorical relations between oral and written texts in the academic discourse of high school students participating in an English Literature class. Identification of the rhetorical acts that high school students use or change in the course of an analysis of literary text can provide a valuable perspective on the ways that adolescents are learning to expand discourse modes in the course of continued language learning.

Introduction

Recent educational concern with literacy achievement has prompted questions regarding the nature of academic learning, inquiry into the subtle relations between spoken and written discourse in academic contexts, and fundamental questions regarding what it means to be literate. The concept of literacy itself is subject to much debate, with definitions ranging from basic reading and writing skills to ways of thinking, reading, writing, and speaking that are necessary to successfully operate as part of a literate culture. In Western societies, the core of literacy skills is learned in school, and by the time an adolescent has finished high school, she or he is expected to have attained the knowledge and communicative strategies (both oral and written) to be able to competently participate, as a literate adult, in society. However, in classroom contexts, adolescents are not only academic learners. They are also continuing language learners who are expanding discourse repertoires, experimenting with oral and written texts, and applying this experience and knowledge to social and academic situations that extend communicative competence. Learning to speak in the register of a discipline, as part of academic language acquisition, expands the communicative strategies to the interlocutor. Lack of opportunity to productively communicate here, as elsewhere, can hinder language use and growth.

When students orally communicate academic knowledge, they are communciating not only declarative knowledge (the 'what' of subject matter), but they are also communicating procedural knowledge (the 'how' and 'why' - ways of thinking about content), both of which are discipline-influenced. In other words, students learn different ways of speaking and writing in English Literature and Physics. Here, in these classroom contexts, lie the protean elements of learning disciplinary register and discourse. Further, and more fundamentally, adolescents are learning to expand the uses and functions of language that have a profound effect on the continuation of language learning and literacy development.

With these points in mind, a study was constructed that had as base the investigation of rhetorical similarities and differences in the oral and written classroom language of third year high school students expressing point of view about a literary work.

Population and data collection methods:

The setting of this study was a high school Junior English Literature class which met every morning for one hour. The participants in the class were 30 high school students (16 females and 14 males) between the ages of 16-17 years and one female teacher who was an experienced high school English instructor. The school was located in a middle class suburban community located in the San Francisco Bay Area of California.

Ethnographic field methods were used to collect and record (using an aural tape recorder) the natural classroom oral language used by teacher and students in monologic and dialogic discourse when analyzing English literary prose texts. Data collection occurred every morning for three months.

The data reported in this brief paper focuses on a nested sample of three students (two males and one female) who orally presented a ctitique of Joseph Conrad's, *Heart of Darkness*, lasting for fifty minutes, to their peers and teacher. Discourse analytic techniques were used to investigate the natural language use of the three students, as well as the language use of their responding peers and teacher. Written language samples were taken from each of the three student's responses to an assignment given by their teacher (See Tables I-III) on the same topics that were orally presented in monologic and dialogic form to their classmates. In this paper, only the first fifteen minutes of monologic discourse will be compared to a written language counterpart (Tables 1 & I-A for transcript) and the comparison will center on the teacher's requested explanation of the topic of 'Conrad's emphasis on the concept of decay in his novel, *The Heart of Darkness.*' A comparison of the speech acts and rhetorical structures used in the oral and written language of these three students forms the focus of this initial report on the results of the investigation of relations between oral and written rhetorical acts in adolescent academic discourse.

The students in this nested sample have been labelled Student A, Student B, and Student C. Student A is a male, aged 16 years who is a successful bilingual Chinese/American English speaker. He considers American English to be his native language but he speaks Chinese frequently in the home. He is a successful student (average B+) who is in his third or Junior year. He enjoys English and American Literature and would like to continue taking American Literature classes in college. Student B is a female, aged 16 years who is a monolingual American English speaker. She is a successful third year high school student (average A) who would like to major in English when she enters college. Student C is a male monolingual American English speaker, a successful student (average A-), and enjoys reading Literature and writing as well as speaking about it but has no plans to major in English when in college. This student triad was chosen to exemplify results that were found in the overall sample, with some interesting exceptions.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION:

In this study a rhetorical act is defined as the application of one or more speech acts (Searle's 1975 taxonomy) to the rhetorical inventions of *logos* (literal/logical analysis), *ethos* (analysis of author's intent), *pathos* (analysis of effect on reader), *arrangement* (analysis of text structure), and *style* (analysis of language patterns) to effectively communicate interpretation of various aspects of a text. Each student's language use was coded for type of speech and rhetorical strategy used in the critique of Conrad's literary prose work.

The speech acts found in the student language samples were *assertives* (the speaker commits to the truth of the expressed proposition), *directives* (attempts by the speaker to have the hearer do something), *commissives* (the speaker commits to some future course of action), *expressives* (the speaker expresses emotion or some psychological state specified by sincerity conditions in the propositional content), and *declaratives* (the speaker brings about a correspondence between propositional content and reality). Assertives formed a high proportion of speech acts used by both female and male students (X = 1.3 per utterance). In this sample, a number of assertives are found in the oral and written language of each student (see Tables I and I-A) and this forms the largest number of acts evident in both speech and writing of these 3 students. Females tended to use more commissives than males (FX = .60 / MX = .37 per utterance), and more expressives than males (FX = .45 / MX = .28). Interestingly, in this sample, it is Student B who gives evidence of more expressives, although not of commissives. In fact, this sample gives few examples of the latter speech act in toto.

Overall, males tended to use more declaratives than females (MX = .55 / FX = .36) and more directives than their female peers (MX = .44 / FX = .36 per utterance). In this sample the directives are all issued by males (usually in the form of introducing the next speaker), although declaratives are represented highly in the oral language sample of Student B (female) who often makes statements about the work, grounding them in social reality (see statements about European social decay - Table I-A, Student B).

Table I

(Written Language Texts)

Short Answer: Heart of Darkness Experience

1. Why does Conrad place so much emphasis on the idea of decay so early in the story? (The decay images begin almost immediately, continuing to the final page of the novella.)
--Brief but explicit paragraph--

Student A :

Conrad places emphasis on decay because the story represents a decay in one human being, Kurtz. Yet, through this decay of Kurtz, Marlow is able to learn about the evils in himself and his surroundings. May it be the decay of the mind or physically, "decay" represents the dark side of that thing or person.

Student B :

Conrad's emphasis on decays foreshadows the story of Kurtz : Kurtz relinquishes the mental decay of society, the hypercritical morality used by society to plunder the natives and their treasures, the absence of reaction towards life, the blind acceptance of the established ideas of society. It is only in the savage jungle, the heart of darknesss, that men can gain the ability to see (&) distinguish between decay and pristine state.

Student C :

Conrad's emphasis on the decay images relates directly to Kurtz and Marlow. Kurtz is experiencing a mental decay, but only because the country around him permits this decay. Marlow is also experiencing a form of mental decay: he wants to listen to Kurtz, not talk to him, and his whole objective is to find Kurtz. He does not think; he only accepts.

Table 1-A

(Oral Language Texts)

T: Okay, lets start the reports. Our first topic is on the concept of decay in Conrad's, Heart of Darkness. Who's got this topic?

B: We do.

(A, B, and C walk to the front of the class, stand in a line. Student B then leans on the teacher's desk, Student A sits in an empty chair and Student C walks to the teacher's podium)

C: We decided to take this topic because we thought this was one of Conrad's main focuses in the book. He uses a lot of images that show decay and he tried to symbolize and emphasize the image of decay through the book. We've all got our own ideas about what this means but we pretty much all agree that it's a central concept. So here goes. ** I think the whole idea of mental decay comes through strongly in the book. Conrad uses Kurtz and Marlow both to project this image of mental decay. Kurtz's mental decay comes from seeing everything around him, I mean, the country, the natives, the whole of Africa going through a decay of its own. His mental decay is a result of being in the center of a decaying land, and seeing and even excperiencing the mental decay of the natives around him. It contaminates his mind. Marlow also displays a form of mental decay. The reader gets this impression from the fact that Marlow never really wants to talk to Kurtz but he always listens to him. It's like he's not thinking. This is his mental decay. So you can see that Conrad uses the whole idea of mental decay through his main characters. And it spreads past them into the land and native people themselves. It's like the whole heart of darkness - all of Africa- is contaminated and is a decaying land and all the characters are experiencing some form of decay and in the case of Marlow and Kurtz it becomes mental decay. Now ___(A) will go on to explain how he looks at the whole image of decay.

(Student C stops, looks around to Student A and steps off to the side. Student A comes up to the podium)

Table 1-A
(Continued)

(Oral Language Texts)

A: I really think that Kurtz is the character that Conrad focuses on when he tries to present the concept of decay in his book. But Conrad uses the character of Kurtz to let Marlow see how the land and the natives are contaminated and how decay is eating through the heart of darkness. Marlow also begins to see evil in himself and evil as decay in the environment, in the land and people. It's..*(pause)* as though decay really is evil in this story and in the images that Conrad uses.

(Student from the class raises his hand): I don't really see how you got the image of decay as evil.

A: Well, it's like decay in this book represents the dark side of people. Like well, like decay isn't healthy, is it? If something isn't healthy or clean, then the opposite of that is dirt and evil. So I think of decay as the opposite of clean and healthy and to me that's evil. Conrad uses the image so often, it's like he's ramming the idea of decay and evil down your throat. I just don't see how you can miss it.

(Student A pauses and looks over to C and B. He then looks to the teacher and back to the class)

A: That's my impression of the image in this book. It's not just mental decay, it's physical decay and both of them are a type of evil that Conrad tries to bring out. It's also decay of the country and native people but ___ (C) talked about that before. So now ___ (B) will continue.

(Student A moves to the side and Student B comes to the podium.)

Table 1-A
(Continued)

(Oral Language Texts)

B: I think the whole concept of decay that Conrad brings through in this entire book is the decay of society. The European morality that Kurtz represents is a form of decay in itself. For example, in European society the whole idea of morality is in a state of decay because they plunder the treasure of the natives and even murder the natives themselves. That whole idea of society's decay comes through with the blind acceptance of established ideas. The heart of darkness is not in a state of decay. In fact, it is in a pristine state. That's where the contrast is. It's the European society's decay that can be contrasted to the innocence and pristine state of the native society and the lack of decay that is found in the heart of darkness. Now because Kurtz and Marlow are part of society, really European society, they are in a state of decay.

(Student from the class raises her hand: Yes, but don't you think that they are being influenced by the natives and savage jungle around them? Isn't that the whole point of being in a heart of darkness?)

A: No, I don't think that's the point. I think Conrad's saying that only when you are in a situation like the savage jungle that you can tell the difference between the pristine and the decay of European society. The heart of darkness doesn't mean being in a decaying place - it means that you are in a place that is so different from western morality that you can start seeing the decay and darkness in yourself as part of decaying society, like Marlow does begin to see. Conrad uses decay to almost represent the story of Kurtz as a member of European society. Anyway that's what I think is important in this story. It's like... *(bell for class rings)*

T: Okay, we have to end this now. Remember we'll continue tomorrow with another question. Make sure you're ready, everyone. Nice presentation, group.

Table II

(Written Language Texts)

Short Answer: Heart of Darkness Experience

2. When Marlow meets the "pilgrims" at the first station, he begins to dislike them. What reasons does he have for his almost immediate aversion to them?

Student A :

They are too "good". They think that everything in life can be made better. They are also materialistic.

Student B :

Marlow is like Kurtz because they both share an aversion for human decay, represented by the pilgrims. Although Marlow's hatred for the decay is only in his subconscience at the time when he meets the pilgrims, he still dislikes them. He hates their human decay as seen through their laziness, their being tutelar heads while their subordinates do all the work. He hates their greediness concerning the ivory. Most of all, he hates their having nothing to say besides the conventional language of the trade.

Student C :

He dislikes them because although they continually clamor for destruction of the savages, they are in reality very timid. Evidence: the fat man with chubby knees faints at the sight of the dying helmsman, but later screams about how the pilgrims shot up the attacking savages. At the end, Marlowe's distaste is confirmed when the pilgrims try to shoot the defenseless savages gathered at the bank to watch Kurtz go.

Table III

(Written Language Texts)

3. Identification: Briefly identify the following and then state why each is important to the novel.

A) "Report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs"

B) Marlow's helmsman

C) The fiancee

D) Rotten hippo meat

E) The Russian harlequin

Student A :

A) Kurtz's report about his work and thoughts on the natives. This is important because it illustrates Kurtz's mentality. The reader gets a glimpse of what Kurtz is like and what he thinks.

B) He steers the ship. He is the steady force in the novel.

C) The fiancee is Kurtz's girl who is waiting for him still. She functions as the final test of Marlow's self realization. To see if he has comes to term with himself and reality.

D) Rotten hippo meat was brought on the ship by the cannibals. It again emphasizes the decay in the novel. The crude and savage world in which Marlow is traveling in.

E) The man who tries to help Kurtz towards the end of the novel but cannot. He is important because through him the reader is agin able to get glimpses of Kurtz and his way of life. The reader also realizes that Kurtz's mentality has deteriorated so much that no one can really help him anymore except himself.

Table III
(Continued)

(Written Language Texts)

Student B :

A) The first part of this report written by Kurtz contains all the beautiful benificent reasons for helping the natives. However, the last sentence of the report shows Kurtz's disgust for such decaying morality: "Exterminate the brutes." This extermination refers to all the hypocritical and greedy Europeans who take advantage of the natives.

B) Marlow's helmsman is killed by the natives who were given orders by Kurtz. Ironically, Kurtz wants to kill "a brute", but he ends up killing a worker or a tool used by these "brutes". This incident shows that as high and admirable as Kurtz's thinking may be, he can still make a mistake.

C) The fiancee of Kurtz is classified as a mere materialistic goal of Kurtz's when he was still at home: "My intended, my ivory..." were symbols of Kurtz's relinquished decaying state of mind. Since Kurtz renounces and frees himself from such materialistic things, these things must be allowed to die. These things, including the fiancee, can be allowed to be "tainted" by a trace of mortality, by a lie. Marlow therefore gives the fiancee a lie at the end.

D) The meat shoes the irresistable force of hunger, which is one of many human instincts. The hungry sailors eat the decaying meat because they cannot overcome their hunger. This shows the difficulty of living in the jungle where one has to set up one's own set of morality. One's will must be strong enough to resist certin forces, because there is "no policeman" , no outside force to restrain them.

E) The Russian harlequin worships Kurtz completely. However Marlow is not jealous of the harlequin because his love for Kurtz is not premeditated. The harlequin does not have to relinquish any previous belief to be taken over by Kurtz, because he had no previous belief. This is used to be contrasted with Kurtz's ability to relinquish his previous belief, an ability that should be envied and admired.

Table III
(Continued)

(Written Language Texts)

Student C :

A) The irony of the manager's proposed mailing of the "Report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" is that it is not the natives who are savage, as the report suggests, but the white man! The attack of the natives on the steamboat expedition sent to relieve Kurtz is purely territorially defensive. However, the enslavement of natives by the white man, the dying native in the shade of the tree, the merciless slaughter of natives, bodies of natives lying in the road - these are all savage acts not mentioned in the report, neither necessary for survival nor humane. The suggestions in the report, Conrad implies, are best directed toward the actions of the civilizers, not those of the barbarians. Irony reigns supreme. Decay. It is the white man who is savage in his interference with the natives, not vice-versa. The white man's here to civilize, but as Marlowe says, the only improvements in the roads he sees are dead bodies.

B) Marlow's helmsman is killed in a savage act -- helmsman is a native --Marlow thinks that the helmsman is stupid for continuing to pilot the boat through a flurry of arrows -- but the helmsman's bravery turns out to be what saves them -- Marlow feels a sort of kinship with helmsman -- he misses him after he is gone -- prefers the helmsman to the pilgrim -- Marlow displays that he does have compassion - conflict between cannibals and pilgrims over how to dispose of the body.

C) The fiancee of Kurtz - Marlow does the thing he most detests -- he lies to her about Kurtz's last words and about what Kurtz was like before his death to prevent the fiancee from knowing the truth - this episode follows Marlow's impression of women: that they must remain in "their own world" and not know about reality. Marlow the Buddha has seen the truth but cannot tell it.

Table III
(Continued)

(Written Language Texts)

Student C : (Continued)

D) Rotten hippo meat is thrown overboard by the pilgrims - example of futility - the meat is kept until it rots and then it is discarded - example of man's misuse and exploitation of the natural country - nature.

E) The Russian harlequin - man wearing patchwork clothes who inhabits the first abandoned station the party goes to. They meet him later on the journey, just before they meet Kurtz. He is Russian because he writes little notes in Russian in the margins of the book Kurtz finds in the abandoned hut. The harlequin is important because he is the first example of a devotee of Kurtz. Yet he is also aware of the shortcomings of Kurtz, and Marlow gleans more information about Kurtz from him. He is the first to say "Kurtz must leave."

When these speech acts were analyzed in conjunction with the rhetorical strategies each student used, it was found that both male and female students used rhetorical acts that showed a literal/logical text to world fit (logos) through the use of assertives. Examples of this kind of rhetorical act were found in statements, such as : *"I don't think this showed much sense because he - the protagonist - should have known the danger he we getting into."* , or *"I don't think this situation would really happen"*. In this sample, such rhetorical strategies are prevalent in the oral language samples and also in student written texts. All students in the triad express point of view by gounding their opinions in text to world fit. Such examples include oral statements by Student A (Table I-A): *I really think that Kurtz is the character Conrad focuses on...; Well it's like decay represents the dark side of people."* and written statements by the same student, *"May it be the decay of the mind or physically, 'decay', represents the dark side of that thing or person." (Table I).*

However, more interestingly, students most often orally communicated knowledge of text to author fit (ethos), text to text fit (arrangement), and text to language fit (style) through assertives and declaratives, such as *"I think the author is really saying..."*, *"This chapter seemed out of place..."*, and *"the language he uses here is hard to understand..."*. In this sample of students, such knowledge ot text to author fit figures prominently in both oral and written texts. Examples of this are found in the written text of Students A-C (Table I) by the statments *"Conrad places emphasis on decay..., Conrad's emphasis on decay..., Conrad's emphasis on the decay image..."*.

In essence, the high school students in the study were found to display effective communication strategies in a discourse register that had an English Literature disciplinary base. In the classroom language of these high school students were found the protean elements of advanced academic discourse which could be developed to promote further language and literacy achievement. These students are not only learning how to analyze aspects of literary text but are also learning the rhetorical acts to effectively communcate this analysis in oral and written language.

Conclusion:

Observing the rhetorical strategies and speech acts of students who have been successful in casting, applying, and orally communicating academic knowledge provides a valuable perspective on the ways that high school students are learning to use specific disciplinary register appropriately in the act of persuasion and analsysis of literary texts. This small sample of student oral and written texts gives some examples of those valuable rhetorical relations and the purpose of this brief, introductory report was to point to the ways that oral and written texts build upon one another in a student's communicative repertoire for continued language learning.

Much current educational research has focused on the differences between oral and written language use, usually taking a linear approach to literacy achievement. There is a need to re-evaluate conceptions about the subtle recursive relations between oral and written texts and their contribution to literacy achievement in classroom contexts.

Acknowledgments:

I am indebted to Ms. Claire Pelton for her guidance, insight, and remarkable power to teach. Her students were indeed fortunate. I would also like to thank all of the students who participated in this study and gave their insightful analyses not only to Conrad's work but also to the ways we look at their own language.

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